

Washington Post
May 22, 2003
Pg. 35

Taking Exception

Defense For The 21st Century

By Donald H. Rumsfeld

Rep. Ike Skelton (D-Mo.) laid out a number of objections on this page yesterday to the president's proposed Defense Transformation Act for the 21st Century. I respect Mr. Skelton's long service, but I disagree with many of his stated objections. Here is why.

Skelton argues that this legislation is the most sweeping overhaul of the Defense Department since the 1986 Goldwater-Nichols Act. He may be right -- but that is precisely the point. We are at this moment fighting the first wars of the 21st century with a department that has management and personnel systems developed decades ago, at the height of the Cold War.

The threats we face today are notably different from that era. We learned on Sept. 11, 2001, that our nation is vulnerable to enemies who hide in the caves and shadows and strike in unexpected ways. That is why we must transform our armed forces. Our forces need to be flexible, light and agile, so they can respond quickly and deal with surprise. The same is true of the men and women who support them in the Department of Defense. They also need flexibility, so that they can move money, shift people, design and deploy new weapons more rapidly and respond to the continuing changes in our security environment.

Today we do not have that kind of agility. In an age -- the information age -- when terrorists move information at the speed of an e-mail, money at the speed of a wire transfer and people at the speed of a commercial jetliner, the Defense Department is still bogged down in the bureaucratic processes of the industrial age.

Consider: we have more than 300,000 uniformed personnel doing jobs that should be done by civilians. That means that nearly three times the number of troops that were on the ground in Iraq during Operation Iraqi Freedom are doing nonmilitary jobs that should be done by civilian personnel.

Why is that? It's because when managers in the department want to get a job done, they go to the military. They know they can manage military people, put them in a job, give them guidance, transfer them from one task to another and change the way they do things. They can't do that with the civil service, because it is managed outside the Defense Department by others, with a system of rules and requirements fashioned for a different era.

The defense authorization bill has grown from only one page in 1962 to a whopping 534 pages in 2001. The department is required to prepare and submit some 26,000 pages of justification, and more than 800 required reports to Congress each year -- many of

marginal value, most probably not read. Since 1975, the time it takes to produce a new weapons system has doubled, even as new technologies are arriving in years and months, not decades.

We are working to fix problems that we have the freedom to fix. We have reduced management and headquarters staffs by 11 percent, streamlined the acquisition process by eliminating hundreds of pages of unnecessary rules and red tape, and begun implementing a new business management structure. But we also need legislative relief. That is why we are asking for:

- Measures for transforming our system of personnel management, so that we can gain more flexibility and agility in the way we manage the more than 700,000 civilians in the department. And let me be clear: The provisions we have proposed explicitly bar nepotism.
- Expanded authority for competitive outsourcing so that we can get military personnel out of nonmilitary tasks and back into the field.
- Measures to protect our military training ranges so that our men and women in uniform will be able to train as they fight, while honoring our steadfast commitment to protecting the environment.

It is true, as Rep. Skelton notes, that the Goldwater-Nichols Act took four years for Congress to pass. But we do not have four years to wait before we transform -- the new threats are here now. If anything, our experience in the global war on terror has made the case for transformation even more urgent. Because our enemies are watching us -- studying how we were successfully attacked, how we are responding and how we might be vulnerable again. In distant caves and bunkers, they are busy developing new ways to harm our people -- methods of attack that could kill not 3,000 people, but 30,000 or 300,000 -- or more. And they are not struggling with bureaucratic red tape fashioned in the last century as they do so.

The fact is that the transformation of our military capabilities depends on the transformation of the way the Defense Department operates. This does not mean an end to congressional oversight. What it means is that we need to work together to ensure the department has the flexibility to keep up with the new threats emerging as this century unfolds.

The writer is secretary of defense.